

Communal protests inflame tensions in eastern Sri Lanka

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A series of protests in eastern Sri Lanka has heightened communal tensions in the province and throughout the island, further undermining the already shaky ceasefire between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed in February 2002.

The North East Sinhala Organisation (NESO), a Sinhala chauvinist group based in the eastern province, effectively shut down the port city of Trincomalee on Wednesday with a hartal or general stoppage of workers and small businesses.

NESO supporters erected barriers at Chinabay, 9 km from Trincomalee, to block transport, in particular the supply of fuel and flour from the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and Prima Flour Mill to Colombo. Buddhist monks played a prominent role in the blockade. Shops in several areas of Trincomalee were closed and government offices were closed as most workers were unable to attend the workplaces.

As many as 10,000 soldiers and police were mobilised in the town of Trincomalee and the surrounding district. The security forces removed the roadblocks despite the opposition of the monks and other NESO supporters and allowed vehicles carrying fuel and flour to move. The NESO warned the government that it would take further action if its demands were not met within five days.

The immediate pretext for the protests was the arrest of two home guards—D. Sarath Bandara and Chandana Piyasiri—by the LTTE in August. The two were detained at Gomarankadawela, a remote village in the Trincomalee district, along with five Sinhala civilians. The LTTE released all but the two home guards, who function as auxiliaries to the military and were armed.

The NESO immediately seized on the issue to agitate against the LTTE and for the release of the detainees. It held a picket on August 23 and two hartals last month. NESO supporters, including family members and relatives of the two men, have been involved in an ongoing hunger strike. Last week the LTTE-backed Trincomalee Tamil People's Forum (TTPF) held a counter protest, further inflaming an already volatile situation.

The issue came to a head this week after the NESO set a deadline for the release of the two home guards. The LTTE, which insists that the men were arrested inside territory under its control, has refused to release them unless 10 of its members held in government jails are freed. President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), concerned at being seen to appease the LTTE, have so far rejected the proposal.

Kumaratunga has twice dispatched high-level negotiators to Trincomalee to meet with the NESO to try to reach a compromise but failed on both occasions. In a thinly-veiled attempt to meet the

LTTE's demand, the appeal court this week ordered the release of ten LTTE prisoners. After a series of delays, the ten were finally freed yesterday and handed over to the LTTE. But the LTTE is yet to indicate if it will release the two home guards.

The NESO and other Sinhala extremist organisations have seized on the detention of the two home guards as a means of whipping up chauvinist opposition to Kumaratunga's attempts to restart peace talks with the LTTE. These parties and groups regard any concession to the LTTE, particularly its demand for negotiations on the establishment of an Interim Self-Governing Administration (ISGA) in the North and East, as a betrayal of the country's Sinhalese majority.

The NESO was established in 1996 amid the country's bitter war and draws its support from layers of Sinhalese businessmen, government officials, the military and Buddhist clergy. They regard the LTTE as a threat to their material interests and are hostile to any steps to end discrimination against Tamils and Muslims in the area. They are completely opposed to the ISGA, which would allow the LTTE to assume the dominant role in administering the North and East. For its part, the LTTE is desperate to establish the unelected ISGA, even in modified form, to enable it to shore up its waning support.

The reactionary outlook of the NESO was spelled out at a meeting in Colombo on October 5. NESO coordinating secretary Sunil Aluthgamage told the meeting: "We have to unite the Sinhala nation to wipe out Tiger terrorism from this country." In a pamphlet entitled "The Path of Tamil Nationalism and the Tasks of the Sinhala People", he openly lined up with elements of the military hierarchy who blame the army's defeats on successive governments. "Whenever the LTTE was weakened these people halted the war and hauled the Sri Lankan army into the barracks," he stated.

The NESO's campaign has further heightened the crisis of the Kumaratunga government. Up until elections in April, Kumaratunga, in alliance with the military and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), campaigned against the United National Front (UNF) government in similar terms. She accused the UNF of selling out the country in peace talks with the LTTE and of undermining national security. The president branded the ISGA as a plan to divide the country and grant the LTTE's long-held demand for a separate Tamil state in the North and East.

After undemocratically dismissing the UNF government in February, Kumaratunga established the UPFA coalition between her Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the JVP and several smaller parties which formed a minority government after the April poll. With her party in power, however, the president immediately came under pressure from layers of business to reactivate peace talks with the LTTE. Her about-

face has opened up sharp divisions in the UPFA, alienated layers of the military top brass and provoked opposition from organisations like the NESO.

The JVP has been caught in a bind. It is in office for the first time but faces the prospect of being outflanked by other Sinhala extremist organisations. The JVP's leaders have threatened to leave the UPFA and bring down the government if Kumaratunga agrees to the LTTE's demand to negotiate on the ISGA.

As the NESO campaign over the home guards developed, the JVP was forced to respond. On September 21, JVP leader Wimal Weerawansa attempted to deflect blame onto the UNF by declaring in parliament: "The LTTE has been enabled to carry on such misdeeds with impunity by the MoU [ceasefire agreement] that Ranil Wickremesinghe signed with the LTTE."

One of the JVP's rivals, the right-wing Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), dispatched its representatives to Trincomalee late last month to express the party's solidarity with the NESO campaign. JHU leader Ellawala Medhananda Thera, a Buddhist monk and MP, led the delegation. He opposed any prisoner exchange and castigated the government for being "without backbone" in its dealings with the LTTE.

Yesterday, the JVP held its own protest in Trincomalee but it failed to attract significant support and was snubbed by the NESO. NESO organiser Aluthgamage accused the JVP of using the issue "for cheap political purposes" and of failing to support the campaign earlier. There is no doubt that the JVP will respond to any challenge to its political base by ratcheting up its own demagogic attacks on the "peace process"—heightening the prospect of a split in the UPFA.

The communal politics of the ruling elites—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—has already turned the eastern province into a political powder keg. The NESO campaign comes on top of protests by Muslim organisations opposed to the LTTE as well as continuing bloody clashes between the LTTE and a breakaway faction led by its former eastern military commander V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna.

Last week, Muslims at Akkaraipattu and Tirukkovil organised a hartal alleging that the LTTE was interfering with their farming at the nearby Vattamadu village. Protestors attacked Tamil-owned shops. Tamils accused the police of standing by and doing nothing to stop the rampage. The bitterness of Muslims towards the LTTE dates back to 1990 when the LTTE forcibly expelled the Muslim population from the Jaffna peninsula, accusing them of being spies for the military. Successive Colombo governments and the military have sought to further exacerbate tensions between Muslims and Tamils.

Since the 2002 ceasefire, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and other Muslim groups have also fueled communal conflict in an effort to put them in a better bargaining position to influence any deal between Colombo and the LTTE. There have been a series of protests against the LTTE involving land disputes such as the one at Vattamadu and against the LTTE's imposition of taxes.

The conflict between the LTTE and the Karuna faction has already created a highly volatile situation in the eastern province. Karuna broke away from the LTTE in March and sought to whip up tensions between "eastern" Tamils and "northern" Tamils. He accused the "northern" LTTE leadership of monopolising positions of power and resources to the detriment of the "eastern" LTTE.

After the April elections, the LTTE moved to crush the revolt, sending hundreds of fighters into the East. Karuna dissolved his organisation and fled to Colombo but there has been continuing

factional clashes and assassinations. The LTTE has accused the military of assisting the Karuna group. While the military denies the allegations, evidence emerged that Karuna and several of his supporters were being sheltered in Colombo by military intelligence.

The machinations of the Sri Lankan military in the East threaten to undermine the ceasefire and plunge the country back to war. The LTTE cannot afford to lose control of the East or allow the emergence of a rival that threatens its claim to be "the sole representative" of the Tamil people. At the same time, the military, backed by more militarist layers of the ruling elite in Colombo, see the split as an ideal opportunity to weaken and destroy the LTTE permanently.

The factional clashes are continuing unabated.

* On September 7, the Karuna group attacked an LTTE checkpoint at Pullimalai, 65 km from Batticaloa. Eight of the 12 LTTE fighters were killed, another two were wounded and a quantity of ammunition seized in the raid. The LTTE claimed the well-armed attackers came from a nearby army camp.

* On September 23 the LTTE killed Karuna's brother, V. Sivanesathurai (Reggie), at Annadmali in an LTTE-controlled area of the Batticaloa district. According to the Colombo media, Reggie became the faction's main military leader after Karuna fled the area.

* On September 28, a rocket propelled grenade struck the village of Panichchankerni, 42 km from Batticaloa, killed one woman and injuring another. The LTTE alleged that the RPG came from the direction of army camp in the area and again accused the military of harbouring Karuna's fighters.

* On October 11, the LTTE killed two of the Karuna group's fighters and wounded six more in Nagastenne, a village about 68 km from Batticaloa. The Sri Lanka army transferred the wounded men from the Polonnaruwa Base Hospital to Colombo.

Taken together, the communal protests, military intrigues and factional fighting have created a dangerous political brew in the East with the potential to provoke a return to the bloody civil war that has already claimed more than 60,000 lives over the past two decades.



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